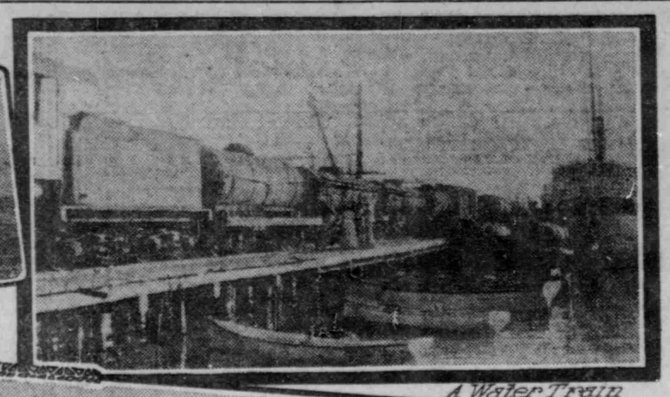
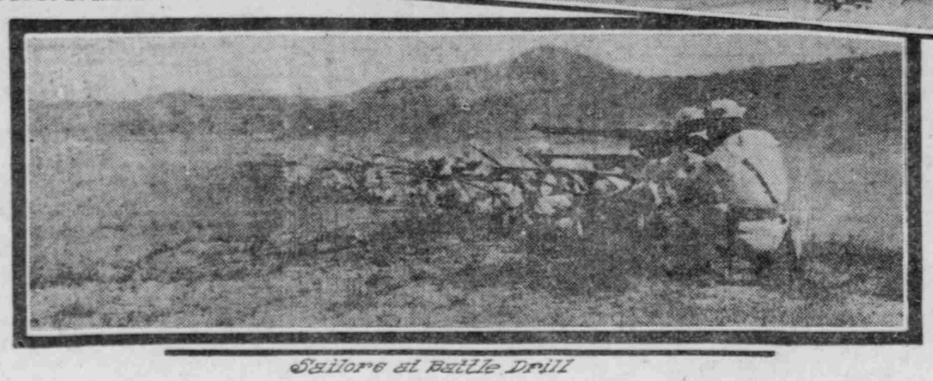
GUANTANAMO BAY the New U.S. NAVAL BASE

Some of the Naval Buildings at Guantanamo



A Water Train

Guantanamo Bay, Showing the Entire Atlantic Fleet at Anchor



Sailors at Battle Drill

THE fact that Secretary of the Navy Meyer has decided upon Guantanamo as a naval base is no surprise to those who know that beautifully sheltered bay. Ever since the Spanish-American war, when the government reserved forty miles of land there, the navy department has looked with favor on this spot as the very best place for small arms target practice and general drill work. For several years the big gun practice was also held there, but this year owing to stormy seas and the difficulty of towing the big targets from Norfolk, the big gun practice took place farther north. The protection of the Panama canal is now uppermost in the thought of the United States government, and Secretary Meyer has made a careful personal inspection of Guantanamo bay. He had with him at the time Commander J. D. J. Kelley, who is at present in Havana superintending the work in reference to raising the wreck of the battleship Maine, Commander Philips Andrews and Engineer Moxon. The two last-named officers are on the American board of survey, and fitted up the naval station on Guantanamo bay. The experience of these men and their advice doubtless went far toward the decision of the secretary in making this the strategic base for the protection of the Panama canal. The present naval station will be totally inadequate if the plans are to be carried out, and the secretary is likely to recommend an additional purchase of land, as well as more and better housing facilities. A large and splendidly equipped wireless station is already on the shores of the bay, but the various departments of the station are at present too scattered to be effective. The new drydock now in construction may have to be changed to a site which is better protected, and to some point where without great expense the bay may be dredged enough to accommodate two floating drydocks. These changes will, of course, necessitate a large expenditure of money. The present water supply at the naval station, too, is totally inadequate for a large naval station, and when the American fleet is in Guantanamo bay for target practice it costs the government over $100 a day for water. This is hauled down to Caimanera, the nearest town from the City of Guantanamo. It is sent in Standard Oil tanks, and on its arrival at Caimanera it is put on the big navy tugs and sent out to the fleet and naval station.

When the Guantanamo naval station is spoken of most people think that it is located near the little Cuban city of that name, but such is not the case, as the station is at least twenty miles from this town, and Caimanera, a little stevedore village, is the nearest place for supplies by land from Cuba. The station is about two miles from here. This town is reached from Guantanamo City by a rickety train, which runs at uncertain hours, intended principally to take workmen down to the "point," where ships are unloaded. There is no first-class passage—indeed, it might be described as about fifth-class. While the distance is not more than twenty miles, it sometimes takes an hour and a half to make the trip. The ballast for the track is scarce, and the train has a sort of rocking-chair motion, and one momentarily expects it to jump off the track into the sand. There is no checking system—you merely point out your baggage and show your ticket. Your belongings are then put on the train, usually by a hotel porter, and when you reach Caimanera you merely claim it. Naval officers who go down by land through Cuba to the station declare that their baggage is never lost.

Caimanera, with an enlarged naval station, will be a supply town of some importance, but just now it is generally spoken of by navy people as a "hell hole," for it is a genuine stevedore town, and many of these men are Mexicans of the lowest type. The town is built along the water front, just as Atlantic City, Venice and numerous other places in the world, but it bears no resemblance to any of these cities, for Caimanera has a style which is distinctly its own, and which is not likely to be copied. The main street is made up principally of saloons, together with a postoffice and telegraph office combined and a few stores. These stretch for perhaps two city squares along the water front, but the houses do not face the water, and only those on one side of the street have a sea view. This side, however, has the real thing, for the houses are built over the water and are propped up on such slender piers that it gives one the shivers every time the sea washes in, lest it should carry away the slender stilts and throw part of the town into the sea. The town has no drinking water of its own, but every morning the reservoir, which is a tank filled with water, comes from Guantanamo for the naval station. One tank is unloaded in a field near the railroad station and the water carriers at once begin their work of delivering it to the residents. The carriers are boys and men who own goats, carts and Standard Oil cans. They fill their cans from the tank spigot and load them into the carts. Six cans for 10 cents is the price, and the water wagon does a thriving business.

There's no hotel in the place where one would care to stay, and the naval officers rush through this place as quickly as possible. There is a man who runs a general store and is known as the Marshall Field of the town, for he serves the fleet with anything from matches to alligator skins, and he has tried to make things comfortable by fixing up an attractive little waiting room in his store, and here the officers wait for the train or until the boat is sent for them. The leading restaurant is run by a Chinaman, and his staple menu is ox liver, ham and eggs, coffee, bread and butter, and this cannot be eaten with any sort of relish if one has had a view of his kitchen.

The most unfortunate thing about this place is the number of saloons and the character of liquor they sell. This does not come under our pure food law, and as Cuba has none, the quality of drinks is bad, and some of our sailors have tested the whisky to their sorrow. The use of liquor is, of course, forbidden at the naval station, and for a man to be found with it in his possession would mean a court-martial, but there is nothing to prevent his drinking the vile stuff.

The establishment of the large station will necessarily bring a large number of people to Caimanera, for all the supplies cannot be sent in by ship. Fresh fruits and vegetables must come through Caimanera, which, if not under better police control, will then become the Port Said of this side of the globe in its vileness. It is a town of few women, for every man who is unfortunate to have to do business in Caimanera leaves his wife in Guantanamo.

The weather in this part of Cuba is always delightful, for even in midsummer, while the days are very warm, the nights are always delightfully cool. The bay is so sheltered and protected as to make an excellent place for ships to lay at anchor. During February and March the wind blows every day for about an hour or two, but even with this the waters of the bay are usually calm. During the early part of this year, when the American fleet was at Guantanamo for the winter practice, the waters of the bay were so warm that more than 2,500 of our sailors were given swimming lessons. Admiral Schroeder decided to find out just how deficient his men were along this line. Knowing that hundreds of sailors come from inland towns where swimming is not one of the average boy's amusements, his aids made an inspection of the fleet and discovered that out of 20,000 men about 3,000 were totally helpless in the water. The swimming instructions were unique. The instructors went into the water first—one of them in charge of a boat; the men who could not swim were equipped with life-preservers, and either jumped or were thrown overboard. They were then given instructions, and were usually able to take care of themselves after two or three days.

The immense drill grounds on the shores of the bay are so large that an army might camp on its sandy plains. Almost absolutely level, it makes a perfect place for all kinds of war games, and the men get a splendid practice of camp life when they go into camp here for target practice. The navy cooks who learn the culinary art at the navy cooking school at Newport, R. I., are put in charge, and the men have good, wholesome fare, with coffee "such as mother used to make." The bay is kept pure as far as possible, no garbage being allowed to be dumped there, as it with the ashes is put on a scow and sent far out to sea. Every effort has been made to keep the place sanitary, and much money must be spent to make Guantanamo a naval base worthy of a great nation like the United States, but with the welfare of the Panama canal under our care, this point will in time undoubtedly become a great naval center—an out-of-the-way place removed from the track of the tourist, where our big ships can be ready to guard and protect that wonderful piece of engineering—the product of American money and the work of American brains.